

Kitchen blaze empties Hanau housing stairwell

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Christmas Eve was anything but peaceful for six Families in Hanau's New Argonner Housing. A kitchen fire that spread to other rooms forced all inhabitants of a stairwell in Building 212 to evacuate.

However with the help and support of the Hanau Community they were able to celebrate the holiday in new quarters.

The U.S. Army Fire Department on Old Argonner Kaserne was alerted about the fire in the third floor apartment at 5:30 p.m. Dec. 24. Military Police were already in the process of evacuating the building when five firefighters arrived at the scene, followed quickly by fire trucks from the surrounding communities, Wolfgang, Großau-heim and Hanau.

The fire started when a kitchen grease fire spread to the living room, according to residents. The occupants, 5-7th Air Defense Artillery Soldier Pfc. Ramon Duverge, his wife Yoseline and their 19-month-old baby boy Anthony escaped the blaze unscathed.

"The flames were extinguished and the building evacuated in a well-coordinated joint action by the more than 50 firefighters from different departments," said U.S. Army Fire Chief Helmut Wichtel. "The firefighters even saved all the Christmas packages lying under the tree."

The apartment in which the fire started was completely uninhabitable said Wichtel. "The kitchen and living room burned out completely and the other rooms suffered heavy damage from the smoke," explained the fire chief. "Because of smoke hazard and water damages in the neighboring apartments all inhabitants of the stairwell had to leave the building."

Help for the dislocated Families was quick at hand. Sgt. Dale Blad, a neighbor, opened his home so they would have a warm place to stay and served hot chocolate and tea.

Later that evening the six evacuated Families were all relocated to Pioneer Inn. With the help of Yolanda Brown from the Housing Office the Families were able to move into new apartments by the end of the week.

"It took us a few days to arrange the move because we had to reopen buildings that had already been closed," said Brown.

Other immediate help was given by the American Red Cross. The Red Cross's Deborah Welch assisted the Families with grants worth more than \$5,000 for food, clothes, medicine and other necessary items.

"The majority of the money went to the Families who suffered the most damage," said Welch.

Community members and especially members of 5-7th ADA donated clothing and food items and opened their homes to the dislocated Families for Christmas. The Duverge Family, which lost basically everything they owned, was invited for Christmas dinner and companionship to the house of Platoon Sgt. Matthew Bieberich and his Family.

Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Jerry Moates from Hanau's Religious Support Office was equally active in coordinating support for the Families in need and providing counseling for those who had lost their homes so shortly before Christmas. "In addition each Family received a \$100 gift certificate from us in order to replace the food they had lost," he said.

Moates kept in constant touch with all the agencies involved and made sure the Families were cared for. "Everyone I spoke to was just really grateful and happy to be OK," he said. "People took the situation in stride. They were thankful for all the help they received and that the community gave them so much support."

If you have a fire to report call civilian 88-117 and the call will be directly answered by the U.S. Army Fire Department which in turn will alert the local German Fire Department (civilian 112). Only persons with DSN lines can dial 117 without the prefix. That does not include housing phone lines.

Red Cross disaster relief

According to American Red Cross senior manager George Georgakakos, it is essential for Families in an emergency situation to contact the Red Cross before addressing other agencies for aid.

"We are the primary organization to help people. The Red Cross has a disaster program for situations like this that takes care of basic immediate needs like clothing, food, medicine and such.

"Whatever assistance people may receive from other agencies before coming to the Red Cross, we cannot duplicate that particular area of assistance," said Georgakakos. "Also, I would like to emphasize that when it comes to disaster assistance, which is part of our congressional charter to help the American people, the American Red Cross gives grants, not loans.

"Other agencies, like the FEMA, Army Emergency Relief, Army Community Services or the Religious Support Office will later help to get people back on their feet. However, they should always come to see us first," he said.

